DOCUMENT RESUME

FL 001 138

ED 027 782

By- Jones, William R.

Where Are We Heading in Foreign Language Teaching?

National Association of Independent Schools, Boston, Mass.

Pub Date Oct 65

Note- 6p.; Speech given before the National Association of Independent Schools Annual Conference, Chicago, Illinois, March 1964

Journal Cit- The Independent School Bulletin; v25 n1 p28-33, Oct 1965

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40

Descriptors- Academic Standards, Audiolingual Methods, *Educational Objectives, *Instructional Materials, *Language Instruction, Language Tests, Linguistics, Mechanical Teaching Aids, *Modern Languages, Programed Instruction, Teacher Education, *Teaching Methods

Following a review of language research and program results during the previous decade, a projection of ultimate and immediate goals in foreign language teaching during 1965-75 is made. The suggestions are incorporated under the headings of the audiolingual approach, programed instruction, linguists' role, mechanical aids, testing, program articulation, general standards establishment, and teacher training. A wider selection of reading materials to complement the audiolingual texts and an adaptation of pattern drills to age level needs are typical of the changes sought. (DS)

ED027782

From: The Independent School Bulletin;
Vol. 25, No. 1, October 1965.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Where Are We Heading in Foreign Language Teaching?

By William R. Jones

When the Foreign Languages Committee asked me to take on this topic, appropriate to the general theme of the 1965 Annual Conference, I thought immediately of one visual aid that would have helped us all to see as far as 1975 more clearly—a crystal ball. On second thought, this idea seemed out of keeping with the spirit of this committee, which I have found to be anything but fatalistic.

After all, we foreign language teachers do agree pretty well on the most important goals of our teaching, and within certain limits we can choose our means of achieving them. We believe that knowledge of a foreign language can help any young person to free himself from limitations and provincialisms inherent in his own society and culture, and that his mind can be enriched by an appreciation of the similarities and differences between his own and other systems of expression. All foreign languages can provide the learner with these advantages. Some, especially the classics and the principal modern European languages, also offer the great literature which forms so important a part of our own cultural heritage. Finally, a knowledge of modern languages is not merely helpful to individual or national interests, but it is indispensable for Americans today, as we assume more responsibility in the search for international understanding and cooperation.

These, we believe, are some of the ultimate goals of foreign language study. Modern language teachers have certain more immediate goals, which are no modest ones: to develop in their students the ability to understand, to speak, to read, and to write a language other than their own. We are not completely free to pursue these aims as we would, of course, but we do have a considerable degree of freedom to determine the direction of our steps. We should not leave our future to the crystal ball.

Dr. Jones is a member of the faculty of the Phillips Exeter Academy (N.H.). When he delivered this talk at the NAIS Annual Conference in Chicago last March, he was also a member of the NAIS Foreign Languages Committee.

I should like to look ahead this morning to some of the steps that we might well take in the next ten years to be nearer to our goals in 1975. This will be easier for me to do, perhaps, if I try also to review the changing situation in the country as a whole in the *past* decade, as a check on where we are now. I hope you will forgive me if from now on I speak primarily as a *modern* language teacher. This is the field I know best, and it is one that has certainly been in great ferment. I know that among teachers of the classics there are also much fruitful debate and experimentation going on, especially concerning questions of course content and methodology. Perhaps the most important specific point at issue is the place of translation, especially in the first year. Underlying the different opinions on such points, however, is a lasting and general agreement among teachers of Latin and Greek that the primary linguistic aim of their courses is to teach a reading knowledge. Among modern language teachers a similar consensus may still exist, but it is more often subject to qualification, and, in any case, as we all know, it has recently been under heavy attack.

Certainly the pace of change in our field accelerated enormously in the decade just past. The drive for new methods and materials took its inspiration from research begun long before that, but the middle fifties do mark a kind of turning point. Then, the crusaders for the new key in language instruction swung the full weight of the Modern Language Association behind their efforts and launched the so-called Foreign Language Program, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. Their vigorous campaign received a tremendous boost from the NDEA, passed in 1958. We have all seen the results of these moves: the greater emphasis upon listening comprehension and speaking; the application of certain principles of programed instruction; the contribution of the structural linguists to the preparation of materials; the growing use of mechanical aids; the establishment of broadly based standards, through the development of valid tests in the language skills; the lengthening and better articulation of course sequences; and the new methods of teacher training.

FL 001 138

The Audio-Lingual Approach

After this decade of highly charged activity, where do we stand now on each of these points? Where do we stand, first, on the cardinal rule of "the new key"--that the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing must be developed in that order? By and large, I believe, the profession has accepted this principle for the first stages of language learning. One of the state manuals puts the rule in capsule form as follows: "From the start, the learner should hear only authentic speech, speak only what has been heard, read only what has been spoken, and write only what has been read." In stating that this principle has been generally accepted, I should probably emphasize the point that for many teachers it does represent the practice as well as the ideal, but only for the earliest stages of language learning, when the basic structures are being assimilated. There is legitimate doubt as to whether one should hold strictly to the prescribed order for very long, except for the youngest learners. The young child takes more kindly to a protracted period of oral mimicry and memorization, and of overlearning, than does the adolescent. The intelligent 15-year-old does see the purpose of constant pattern drills, and he can usually profit greatly from them—for a while. But to insist for too long that he read only what he has learned to say, is to do violence to his intellectual curiosity and capacity.

For these and older students, we must strike a balance in our methods in the coming years, recognizing the effectiveness of methodical oral drill at any age, but not allowing it to monopolize the course. Easy familiarity with the spoken language is certainly a desirable end in itself, but we should remember that the great majority of our independent-school students will pursue their education through the college level and beyond, and *in this country*. For them, the acquisition of a thorough reading knowledge will be of most lasting benefit. To the extent that the new approach leads naturally to true proficiency in reading—and it can—it should be of special interest to us. Conversational skill by itself remains limited in scope; if not continually exercised, it is quickly lost. It will be easier to recapture after a period of disuse, if a sound knowledge of the written language is there to help recall it.

This may be the place to mention certain needs that many of us feel as we try to build up the various skills. First, the great need for published pattern drills of general utility, both printed and taped, which can be used without regard to a specific text. There is also a need for more and better visual aids to learning new material. In the general fascination with audial memory and sound reproduction, the role of the eye in helping to fix meaning has sometimes been neglected. Finally, there is a real need for reading materials to supplement those basic texts whose emphasis is heavily audio-lingual, during the first year or two of study at the secondary level. We need a far wider selection of readers, entirely in the target language and graduated in difficulty, so that they will contribute to rather than hinder true mastery of simple spoken language. How fruitful it could be if those of us who clearly felt these needs were to collaborate in efforts to meet them in the next decade! Just think, for example, of the thousands of man-hours that must have been spent by French teachers in duplicated efforts to supplement the otherwise fine Mauger texts with much-needed exercises. Collaborative efforts along such lines could be useful to many of us, and there is a good chance, I understand, that the NAIS can be instrumental in finding supporting funds. It should also be more generally known that publishers will often advance the funds that teachers need to devote long stretches of time exclusively to the preparation of useful materials.

Programed Instruction

What is the current interest in programed instruction contributing to our field? I do not mean teaching machines or the few programed language courses that have been developed for self-instruction. I refer rather to the psychological principles underlying this type of instruction.

In order to clarify what I have in mind, let me take a moment to run over the three essential defining characteristics of programed instruction. *First,* it must be based on detailed specification of the skills, knowledge, and responses which it is hoped to produce in the student. *Second,* the material of instruction must be organized and presented in a carefully designed sequence of steps of appropriate size for the learner to master readily, and so arranged that each step is made easier by virtue of the material learned in previous steps. And *third,* the student must have the opportunity to test his mastery of each step without delay, by prompt confirmation of correct responses or by correction of wrong ones. The perfect program presumably would build up only good habits in the attentive learner, who could make no errors at all. Perhaps there is nothing fundamentally new in these principles—they certainly contain echoes of Descartes' *Méthode* and of the Socratic method of teaching—but with the help of the educational psychologists such as Skinner we are rediscovering the old ideas and are making new applications of them.

The Linguists' Role

The linguists too are making solid contributions. Is it possible today to evaluate fairly the contribution of descriptive linguistics to language teaching in the last decade? I must confess, myself, to a less than perfect understanding of their science—I'm not quite sure that I can always tell the difference be-

tween an allophone and a segmental phoneme. And perhaps the somewhat belligerent tone of the linguists' slogans threw me off for a while. For example, "Teach the language, not about the language." A good many of us thought that we had been doing just that. We wondered whether the new key would allow the thinking student no use of analysis or of generalizations about structure at all, under whatever name, in the learning process. "Language is speech, not writing." Were we then to forget that our students were already literate and would inevitably want to use their eyes, or at least their mind's eye, to learn with, and would expect to find more in a new language than just a series of spoken dialogues? "A language is a set of habits." Were we seriously to deny the play of intelligent discrimination in language, and define all verbal expression as a set of conditioned reflexes?

No, obviously the linguists never intended these statements to be complete in themselves. They are formulas, intended to emphasize certain truths about the *early* stages of language learning, and as such they have had a definite shock value. In the last few years especially, we have seen some of the findings of linguistics applied more and more widely in instructional materials, not only in the situational dialogues to be mimicked and memorized, but also in the carefully thought-out pattern drills which do effectively produce fluency and an inductive understanding of structure. Courses in applied linguistics have found their place in teacher-training programs, and the new set of MLA teachers' proficiency tests includes one on this subject.

By 1975 both the linguists and the psychologists may be able to tell us a good deal more about the learning of language, especially if we can work with them. Sensible compromises will have to be reached between the ideal and the practical, especially with respect to the active skills of speaking and writing, and the time available to devote to them. We may well learn more about the presentation of material, not only as textbook writers, but also as classroom teachers. If the most effective method of learning is by small increments, very gradually built up, then just how can we best use the limited time allotted to us? Shouldn't we ask our schools for more flexibility in scheduling for the language student as he goes along, providing him with frequent class meetings or drill sessions under close supervision at first, none of them too long—then gradually fewer, longer meetings, as he progresses, with more of the work assigned to be done on his own?

Mechanical Aids

WHAT changes have there been in the last decade in the use of mechanical aids? It is not necessary to pile statistic on statistic here; just one comparison should do. In 1957 sixty-four public and independent schools had language laboratories. Today over 5,000 schools have them. Rapid advances have been made in the quality and variety of electronic and other equipment on the market, though more attention has been given by manufacturers to audio than to visual aids in our field. The crusade for the audio-lingual approach and, of course, the NDEA funds, have put the language laboratory in the limelight, and the danger still is that the public, and even a few teachers, may expect uniformly good results for all. We do not yet know enough about the language-learning processes, and how they vary from one individual to another, to produce such uniform results—but we are aware of great differences in the ways of learning. In the next ten years we should try to determine much more precisely the best uses of the language laboratory. We must find ways of identifying those students who cannot learn effectively by laboratory drill, and we must develop alternative procedures for them.

There is little doubt that increasingly useful contributions to the teaching of foreign languages and cultures will be made possible in the coming years, thanks to improved equipment, from projectors and recorders to TV screens and video tapes. We are still in the stage of high costs, and of trial-and-error experimentation with such mechanical aids. We could help one another a great deal by exchanging our impressions and experiences, our enthusiasms and reservations. Perhaps there are just two points that we would all agree on to begin with: the very best mechanical apparatus is only as effective as the teaching material which it helps to present, and this material is effective only if it forms a well-integrated, meaningful part of the classroom program.

Testing

WHAT have been the developments in testing language skills in recent years? We are just beginning to see, especially in the example of the MLA-ETS tests of competence in five languages, more careful measurements of each of the separate skills—of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. Many teachers have felt the need for such tests, which are certainly not easy to devise. It is important for us to evaluate whatever we teach, and helpful for the student to have the benefit of the evaluation. The NAIS Committee on French was among the first groups to see this and to set up tests of speaking ability, along with the more usual ones. It seems likely that the member schools of this organization will continue to want fresh NAIS tests made each year, especially as techniques are perfected for measuring the separate skills. The MLA foreign language tests will prove useful, but there are only two forms of these for the elementary level and two for the intermediate level of each language, and after a few years we shall be too familiar with the contents of these tests to find them useful for all purposes.

I should like to say a word here about the ordinary classroom variety of testing, so much more important in our teaching than any external measurement. Not so many years ago, I was still guilty of devising too often what might be called the "obstacle race" type of test, full of structural high hurdles and dangerous idiomatic pitfalls. Most of the boys got through them, with great expenditure of energy, but not so many developed a smooth running style. I gradually learned the virtue of more frequent quizzes that encouraged correct expression and taught as they tested, so to speak—and without the use of English. The effect has been much better. Still, I am sure that a great deal remains to be discovered, in the next ten years, about testing and its contribution, not so much to the grade book as to the learning process.

WHAT of the College Boards, since College Boards there must be? They have added a new dimension in the last few years, with the supplementary listening comprehension tests given in February. The Board should not wait any longer to make these a required part of the regular achievement tests, retaining the practice of reporting separate scores for the information of colleges and schools. The present ambiguous status of the supplementary tests is not helpful either to students or to teachers.

An effort should be made in the next ten years to devise means of including a speaking section, as well, in the achievement tests, difficult though this seems to be. Any such additions will require a greater allotment of testing time for the results to be really valid, but it would be well worth it, if only as an encouragement to the planning of balanced courses.

For still another reason I should very much like to see the College Board develop its achievement tests into truly comprehensive ones that tested all the language skills. I am thinking of their use as a possible screening device for eleventh-grade students requesting admission to a twelfth-grade advanced placement course. The great increase in the number of students taking the AP exams since 1955 must show something about the growing need for this kind of course, as well as the progress made in language teaching. At the same time, we hear more frequent protests that too many students are pushing or are being pushed ahead too soon.

There is something paradoxical about the criticism you hear concerning the special nature of the advanced placement tests and their focus on literature and the written language. The burden of the attack seems to be that the examinations are, in fact, advanced—too much so for the reasonably good fourth-year student. But isn't that exactly what they are supposed to be? The AP programs were set up to improve articulation between school and college courses for the *exceptional* student. In language work this must mean the boy or girl who, because of a very early start, unusual talent, or special advantages, has attained a degree of mastery sufficient to let him go beyond the others, and do in school what the others will be doing in college. It is surely not the AP program that is at fault if too many students are let into it before they are ready. If it were to be watered down to the point where all good fourth-year students could handle it, then another program similar to the original one would have to be invented, for the original reasons.

Why not, instead, encourage the development of a College Board Achievement Test which, by testing all the necessary language skills at a sufficiently high level, would assure the critics and the eleventh-grade candidates themselves of their readiness? Language departments of colleges which are members of the Board might determine and recommend to the schools a minimum qualifying score. Students who did not qualify would presumably be better advised to go on into the school's regular twelfth-grade course, which would be more nearly suited to their level of achievement.

Articulation of Language Programs

I HAVE been asked to mention, in connection with the general question of articulation, a practice which my department has followed for a number of years, and which may be useful to others. Each June, before our seniors leave, we ask which ones are thinking of continuing the same language in college. We then fill out an information sheet on each boy and send it to the appropriate language department of the college he will be attending. Each instructor supplies the information concerning his own students, including a brief description of the last course taken, a list of the textbooks used, comments on the student's particular linguistic strengths or weaknesses, his grade, his College Board or AP scores, and so on. We tell the boys that we are doing this, and we urge them to talk over the question of placement with the college department in September, before choosing their courses. The number of appreciative letters from the college language departments has convinced us that this procedure is worthwhile.

This matter of the proper articulation of school and college programs is, of course, only a part of the broader problem of articulation in language instruction all along the line, from the elementary grades on. The experience of the last decade clearly proves what had long been believed, especially in the independent schools, that for modern languages at least, an early start can give a great advantage to the learner. Any

one of us who has been fortunate enough to receive young students with several years of really effective training behind them, must be an enthusiastic supporter of the FLES idea. Unfortunately, some communities have been lured by the appeal of very early language instruction, but have not made provision for continuity throughout the grades. There have been, and there still are, in the early grades some language programs so haphazardly planned and desultory in their execution as to nip all student interest in the bud. Nevertheless, a great deal of progress has been made. In Chicago alone there are 22,000 young children enrolled in FLES programs this year. One of the most useful things we could do in the next ten years would be to help with planning and carrying out such programs.

The problem of continuity will always exist, whether the learner begins his study in the third or in the eighth grade. We all know the difficulty of placing students with previous training when they enter our classes at the high-school level—placing them in such a way that they will neither lose momentum, on the one hand, nor be overwhelmed, on the other. Diversity among American schools is recognized as a source of strength, as the NAIS would be the first to insist. At the same time, it is a source of problems such as this one of articulation. I do think that there is room for much more common agreement than we now have, on both content and method for the successive levels of a language sequence.

Establishing General Standards

Various forces have accelerated the trend toward setting national standards and patterns for modern language teaching in recent years, and these have affected the public schools more than the independent ones. Perhaps the annual national or regional contests, sponsored by the various language teachers' associations, have been influential. Much more so has been the National Defense Education Act, which made possible the creation of so many summer language institutes, and the appointment of Foreign Language Supervisors in almost every state, responsible in part to the United States Office of Education. These developments are surely helping to raise standards in many places. There is, of course, always the danger of *excessive* standardization, which can stifle initiative and imagination. It may have seemed at times as though some brilliant promotion manager at Harcourt, Brace and World, or at Holt, Rinehart and Winston, must be master-minding all the storm of activity since 1960, whipping us all into line in the name of Nelson Brooks; but that, no doubt, was just a false illusion.

Quite seriously though, it may be essential for language teachers in the independent schools to work, in the next ten years, toward the maximum degree of common definition that is compatible with diversity. The principal questions involved, it seems to me, are to distinguish language-levels from grade-levels, and to define with more precision what our minimum expectations for each language-level are. (This, of course, is just what Nelson Brooks has been saying for some time.)

To what extent should we fall in with similar efforts being made by the NDEA Language Institutes and by the State Supervisors? Certainly we ought to know what is going on in the public schools and cooperate in any useful effort. Now that the institutes are open to us on equal financial terms, some of us should take part and be familiar with their work. In our own states, we should at the very least meet with colleagues in the public schools in such organizations as the AAT's, to exchange ideas. We should try to exchange class visits with them, and see first-hand the superlative job which they so often do. On the regional or national level, we should play an active role in any meetings such as the Northeast or the Pacific Northwest Conferences on Foreign Languages, which have been of such great influence in recent years. In the independent schools we must set our own high standards first of all, of course. But to do this, it will help to know what is going on in the public schools from which so many of our students come.

Teacher Training

It is in the nature of things, perhaps, that no group of independent schools has yet organized training courses for language teachers. Traditionally we have done fairly well without the use of certification systems, and we prize the freedom we have to seek good teachers without regard to the course credits they may have amassed. In our separate schools, we do what we can to train one another. We should be aware, however, of the kind of opportunity now available to those training for public-school teaching. I am thinking of a well-organized summer program such as the Harvard-Newton one, for example, in which practice teaching plays an important part. In general, university M.A.T. programs are geared to the preparation of teachers for the public schools. Should we explore during the next few years the possibility of a joint university-NAIS-sponsored summer training program in language teaching for the independent schools?

Everything possible should be done by our schools in the coming years to see that language teachers are given opportunities for useful refresher periods in the country whose language they teach. The summer tourist season is short and expensive. More important, it is not always the best time of year to renew our cultural and human contacts abroad.

• • •

I HAVE necessarily omitted a number of topics in this quick survey of progress made and of steps still to be taken. There is, just for example, the question of our responsibility to encourage the learning of the so-called "critical" languages, such as Chinese or Arabic. By 1975 particularly interested secondary school students should be able to find well-organized summer institutes devoted to these more difficult languages, in which beginners can make a really rapid and solid start, through intensive concentration. This will probably take cooperative planning among the schools of a given area. You will think of other special problems which require special handling, and which will deserve our attention in the decade ahead. Rather than try to identify more of these, I prefer to close with a general thought which must have occurred to us all very often.

As our world has grown smaller, we have seen the study of foreign languages gain increasing relevance in the eyes of young people. Since the last war, especially, young Americans have had so many more opportunities than most of us ever did—to meet students from other lands, to see and hear and use programs and materials produced in the country whose language they are learning, to look forward to a period of study or travel abroad themselves. There is so much more at hand now to feed their curiosity, especially during that early "stage of romance" which Whitehead puts first in his three-stage cycle of intellectual progress. Both classicists and modernists, we must seize the moment and do all we can in the next ten years to make foreign languages and cultures live in our classrooms. We must help the student to look out farther, beyond himself and the familiar horizons, whether back in time or away in distance, adding always to his discovery of *new* relevance.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BULLETIN is published by the National Association of Independent Schools, 4 Liberty Square, Boston, Mass. 02109, four times during the school year: October, December, February, and May. Subscriptions: Members $1.00; Non-Members $3.50. Single copies: Members 50 cents; Non-Members $1.00. Copyright © 1965 by the National Association of Independent Schools.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Natl. Assn. of Independent Schools TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."